(Right) New broom: the cover of the first UK issue of *Good Housekeeping*, March 1922.

Catherine Horwood looks at how the launch of *Good Housekeeping* in the UK 75 years ago heralded a new image of domestic activity.

HOUSEWIVES' CHOICE – WOMEN AS CONSUMERS BETWEEN THE WARS

In March 1922, America's leading domestic magazine was launched in Britain. Prophetically, publicity promoted *Good Housekeeping* as 'infinitely more than a magazine – a New Institution, destined to play an important part in the lives of thousands of women'. It was claimed that 'no magazine to compare with *Good Housekeeping* has ever been attempted in this country before'. Was this a fair claim? Did *Good Housekeeping* indeed become a trend-setting 'institution' – or was it part of an inevitable growth industry as a sea of consumerism linked to household goods washed over women's lives?

Women's magazines have often been seen as central to the promulgation of a cult of domesticity, and perhaps none more so than *Good Housekeeping*. Its very title seems to confirm this clichéd image. Undoubtedly, many women's magazines have tried to elevate the image of women as home-makers by aiming to dignify what elsewhere could be seen as drudgery. They attempted to do this by raising the status of housework to that of a true 'science' and by encouraging women to buy their way to a new domestic freedom. But whose side were they really on? Were they trying to tip their readers' lives towards an even more domestic bias? Did publishing entrepreneurs see in advertising, a golden opportunity to harness the wealth of the rapidly developing manufacturing industries? Or were they merely answering a need as shifts occurred in the pattern of women's daily lives during these two interwar decades?

Today everyone accepts that we live in a consumer society and that women are prime targets for advertisers of domestic goods. Seventy-five years ago, this was uncharted territory as magazines and manufacturers appeared to join forces to change the status of domestic housework. For middle-class women suddenly life in the early 1920s seemed exciting and full of new opportunities in the form of careers, clothes, cinema, cars, quite apart from the vote. New Woman had arrived. Or had she? Less than twenty years later, by the start of the Second World War, it appeared that in fact she had been propelled back towards the shelter of the home. The enormous strides in terms of women's progress had petered out to

be replaced by a domesticity cult reminiscent of the Victorian 'angel in the house'.

This was undoubtedly aggravated by the shortage of domestic help in the home as working-class women looked elsewhere for job opportunities. As the 1930s approached, there were jobs to be had in the 'new' industries and especially in manufacturing consumer goods where the shorter hours appealed, though wages never matched the men's. For many middle-class women, this loss of domestic help was a double blow. The pressure to keep up standards was enormous and the 'servant problem' was a constant topic of conversation among middle-class householders, making the time ripe for a boom in 'service magazines'.

In spite of *Good Housekeeping*'s claims, the idea of domestically-orientated or service magazines, as they are known, aimed at British middle-class women was not new. In 1852, publishing entrepreneur Samuel Beeton launched *The English Woman's Domestic Magazine* at the startlingly low price of 2d a copy. An instant success, it had achieved a circulation of 50,000 by 1860 and became the 'blueprint for the modern magazine industry'. It appealed to the rapidly-expanding middle-class sector who relished the mix of fiction, fashion and food, the latter provided by Beeton's wife, the soon-to-be lionised Isabella.

The German company Siemen had given this 1911 hint of how automatic cleaning (with a permanent socket installation in each room) might ease servant problems; but it was portable vacuums that took off after the First World War.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century had also been a boom time for women's magazines. There were forty-eight new launches in the period up to 1900. The most resilient and noteworthy of these was *The Lady* in 1885, an up-market society weekly but read by the aspiring upper-middle classes as well. However it was 'society' journals such as this that were to suffer the biggest drops in circulation in the aftermath of the First World War as Britain began to attempt to adapt to the social upheaval it had caused. Established magazines such as *The Lady* tried to make allowances for the changing status and interests of their readership, who were rapidly becoming the 'New Poor', in an attempt to halt the decline. However, *The Lady* failed to follow through with much practical advice and did little to reassure advertisers, the life-blood of the magazine industry, who turned instead to magazines aimed at the 'New Rich', the rising band of aspirant middle-class families who were constantly seeking to improve their standard of living – more often than not by purchasing the latest status symbol; cars and domestic appliances.

The inspiration for these new machines and gadgets undoubtedly came from America where they were well ahead of Britain in the development of domestic equipment. In the US, ice-chests, the forerunners to refrigerators, were common in most homes by the turn of the century. Electric irons had first been patented in 1904, and it was shortly after this that W.H. Hoover put his portable electric sweeper on the market which by 1917 was available nationwide for the very low price of $19.45.

The first to capitalise on the changing lifestyles of middle-class British women was George Newne's *Homes & Gardens* in 1919, to be followed a year later by *Ideal Home* from Odhams Press. These were among the earliest magazines to introduce housewives to the wonders of the electrical appliances that were beginning to appear on the market. But some magazine editorials were cautious and reluctant to recommend them. *Homes & Gardens*, for example, took the rather restrained view that 'unfortunately the new electric vacuum cleaner was not, as yet "practical politics" in the home'.

The US magazine industry was also well ahead in capitalising on middle-class women's need for advice in coping with their new-found servantless-state. Considering the popularity of

Small electrical appliances were only just beginning to be accepted in 1920s British middle-class homes – hence the need for advertising campaigns like this GEC 'Magnet' one of 1925.

the original American edition of *Good Housekeeping*, the decision to launch a British version was hardly surprising. It had been founded in 1885 by Clark W. Bryan whose aim was 'to produce or perpetuate perfection, or as near unto perfection, as may be obtained in the household'. An instant success, it was sold to the Phelps Publishing Co. in 1900, who instigated a small 'experiment station', known editorially as 'The Bride's First Attempts' and which became the forerunner of the now famous Good Housekeeping Institute.

However, it was the purchase of the magazine in 1911 by Randolph Hearst in one of his ventures into publishing and its subsequent move to New York

that established *Good Housekeeping* as America's leading domestic magazine. Hearst's employment of Dr Harvey W. Wiley, government promoter of the 1904 Pure Food and Drug Act (known as 'the Wiley Laws' as a nutritional adviser), and his marketing promotion of the magazine's 'Ironclad Contract' which Phelps had initiated in 1902, and which was to lead to the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, were to prove an inspired combination. What gave the British *Good Housekeeping* the edge over its competitors was the comparatively high standard of feature writing throughout. In a break from previous magazine practice, the editor, J.Y. McPeake, went to the trade papers for experts, rather than to the 'hack writers of Fleet Street'.

Magazines were the main source of information on new domestic ideas and innovations, but they were also backed up by books such as *The Servantless House* in 1920 which told women that the answer to the vanishing maids lay with 'the equipment of the house rather than with details of any daily arrangement of work'. While the housework debate would rage within the editorial pages of women's magazines, appliance manufacturers were delighted to find these ideal vehicles for their goods. The relative financial security of the readership is confirmed by the heavy advertising investment from the newly-developing consumer industries such as the British Commercial Gas Association, the British Electrical Development Association and their associated suppliers.

Between 1920, a year after the BEDA was established, and 1930, domestic electricity users had risen from one in seventeen households to one in three. An advertisement in an early issue of *Ideal Home* in 1925 encouraged women to increase their use of electricity in the kitchen by investing in a variety of small appliances. In December 1927, *Good Housekeeping* carried advertisements from thirty-four different light, cooking and heating companies, in addition to numerous washing machine and vacuum cleaner companies and other 'labour-saving' devices.

So, while the bread and butter of these magazines' advertising content were the everyday household necessities of life such as soap, shoes and stockings, the icing on the cake came from the mass-produced commodities of the 'new' industries. Advertisers were quick to realise that while their readers were not wage-earners, their influence over the family budget often meant that 'women rather than men held the purse strings' and aimed their marketing strategies accordingly.

A strong relationship between advertising and editorial content was yet to develop but nevertheless the juxtaposition of commercial goods with editorial advice on practical domestic issues was a sound marriage for manufacturers to feel encouraged. Early issues of *Ideal Home* gave a guarantee on advertised goods though this had been dropped by the thirties. *Good Housekeeping* was one of the first to clinch the relationship with the added incentive of the 'Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval' – a refund guarantee – giving every advertiser an enviable endorsement (though there is no record of how successful the guarantee was, or what level of complaints ever materialised).

In the early twenties, in spite of the decrease in servant numbers, the assumption of advertisers was still that they were aiming at women with help in the household. It is evident that labour-saving devices such as the vacuum cleaner were being sold as an aid to the disappearing domestic servant, rather than the lady of the house herself. 'The Hoover', it was claimed, 'is no longer a luxury. It is to-day a necessity. It frees you and your servants forever from the tyranny of the broom', stated an advertisement in July 1923. Another for a washing-up machine claimed: 'there is nothing more disagreeable than to be confronted with the miserable task of washing-up after a good meal' but clearly did not want to assume that the purchaser would be the one to get her hands wet as it ends, 'considerate housewives will install one for lightening the maid's duties'. Such 'consideration' to servants was never so obvious before the servant shortage.

As the 1920s progressed, a gradual shift in emphasis can be seen. The housewife herself became shown using the vacuum cleaner or polishing the furniture in advertisements – although always looking as though she thoroughly enjoyed the experience. By the end of the decade, there

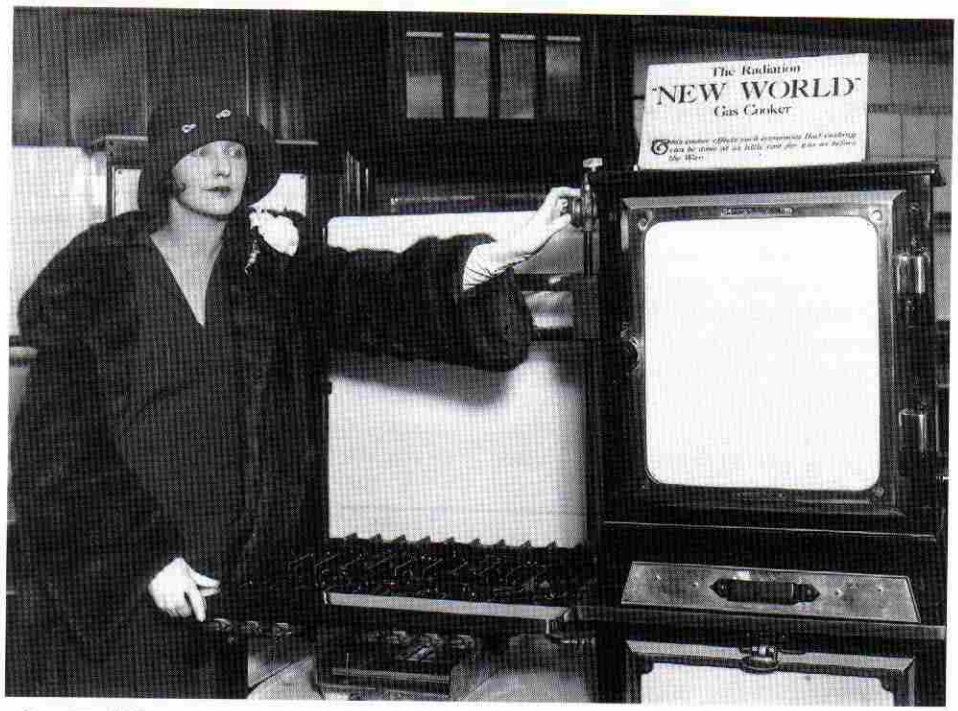
Something for the little lady: this 1924 festive ad for Electrolux promised domestic leisure, but the emphasis in magazine editorials on ever higher standards of cleanliness dulled the impact somewhat.

is little doubt that the advertisers realised that the majority of women were having to do at least some of their own cleaning. Ironically, the domestic appliances they would use were now being made by the very women who would previously have done these jobs as servants.

Somewhat surprisingly, *Good Housekeeping* in the twenties was suggesting that the housewife 'no longer expends all her energy and hopefulness in domestic labour. She is gaining a little freedom, a little time for culture, and even for pleasure'. As they promised in their launch issue, 'the time spent on housework can be enormously reduced in every home' by good household management, and 'there should be no drudgery in the house ... There must be time to think, to read, to enjoy life ...'

This was not a sentiment universally echoed in other magazines, however. *Ideal Home*, in an editorial extolling the virtues of the 'Easiwork Kitchen Cabinet' in 1925, believed that 'it is necessary [for a woman] to avail herself of all the short cuts in the domestic routine in order that she may have further time to devote in the interests of her husband and her children'. The majority of magazines of this time were full of similar unintentionally patronising homilies.

The message now being sent to the middle-class woman was that 'the problem of domestic service can be solved mainly by the housewife herself by means of thoughtful organisation and the most up-to-date equipment'. This was reflected by a noticeable shift in the editorial direction to an increasing focus on housecraft. For example, in *Good Housekeeping* in the early 1930s, over half the features now emphasised home and family matters. The development of their 'how to' section reinforced the prevailing notion that a woman's true vocation was to run a home successfully.



New World home economics? This 1926 picture promotes – courtesy of a nervous flapper – a 'radiation gas cooker'. The name was appropriate since it was American consumer fashions that were driving the British market.

For, while the numbers of women in domestic service marginally increased again, only a little over half the number now lived 'in'. One 'char' was having to do the work previously done by two or three maids. By 1938, more than half Britain's households relied on domestic appliances rather than domestic help. The replacement label 'housewife', rather than 'mis-

***Multum in parvo*? Society ladies in Surrey examine this 1931 miniaturised washing machine, claimed to wash and dry clothes in just three minutes; its subsequent performance is unknown.**

tress of the household' completed the transformation of middle-class British women into 'a species of home technician, wrapped in a new and powerful aura of homebound femininity'.

The change was further reflected in advertisements which were also now directly aimed at women doing all their own cleaning. Many machines did not live up to their promises, such as one that claimed to wash, rinse, wring, dry, iron and then turn into a vacuum cleaner, but in general, advertisers had little trouble in persuading their new target group to buy the latest equipment, especially with the introduction of hire purchase schemes which tempted many to obtain items otherwise beyond their means. This is illustrated by the fact that at the end of the 1920s there were some 30,000 vacuum cleaners in Britain, but in less than ten years the figure had reached nearly a million. The stigma of buying household goods on credit, still seen by many as a blighting feature of the working classes, was gradually being eroded by editorials which confirmed its acceptability.

Whether these new items actually did improve women's lives is very much open to question. The new technology for washing clothes that was sweeping the US was slow to reach British women and in 1938, 96 per cent of households were still coping with boiling up the copper, a washboard and mangle. The appeal of a gas or electric cooker that could be turned on immediately is obvious against the old coal range that not only involved constant re-fuelling, but also laborious cleaning and clearing. That said, this breed of service magazine definitely contributed to the mania for 'keeping up appearances' by encouraging immaculate cleanliness in the home and which probably involved women in more hours actual work with their new appliances to achieve higher standards than was absolutely necessary for a healthy home.

Women's importance as consumers throughout this period is in little doubt. Advertisers were quick to capitalise on their influence over the major family purchases outside the domestic sphere as well. In both the 1920s and 1930s, large advertisements regularly appear in these magazines from the major car manufacturers such as Ford, Austin and Vauxhall. For many middle-class women living in the new suburbs, a car would have been a lifeline to an otherwise restricted social life. As Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary of 1927: 'we talk of nothing but cars ... This is a great opening up in our lives ... Soon we shall look back at our pre-motor days as we do now at our days in the caves'.

In terms of advertising fashion and beauty items, however, it was still early days. There is little mention of make-up in either the editorials or advertisements in women's magazines of the 1920s, although this was the time when Coco Chanel legitimised the suntan, and lipstick and powder were no longer signs of moral decadence – at least among the well-to-do. As Robert Graves observed in 1940, 'the use of facial pigment in Britain [in the Twenties] had not gone very far along the usual course ... from brothel to stage, then on to Bohemia, to Society, to Society's maids, to the mill-girl, and lastly to suburban women'.

Once into the 1930s, the return to fashion of the curved silhouette confirmed that female emancipation was well and truly over and that the romantic and escapist world of the cinema was beginning to have a major impact on women's dress. But while editorials were encouraging married women to keep making an effort to look good for their husbands, the use of obvious make-up was still very much frowned upon, as a survey in *Good Housekeeping* in 1930 revealed. In one of the first surveys of its kind, this showed that only 20 per cent of their readers used lipstick, 7 per cent, rouge and 5 per cent, scent. The majority used some sort of face cream, however, showing that advertisements for Pond's Cold Cream with the snob-appeal of Mildred, Lady Oranmore and Brown, and Viscountess Moore, was still stronger in influence than the sex appeal of Hollywood film stars to the morally staid women of the British middle classes.

By 1935, however, the pervasive influence of the cinema had gained a hold, a fact acknowledged by *Good Housekeeping* in a 1935 feature, 'What Price Beauty?'. 'Most women spend more conscious effort nowadays on their appearance ... the films have had much to do with it' the article reported, going on to list the imaginary beauty budgets of six women. Their out-goings should range, the magazine believed, from £3.2s2d. a year for a provincial typist, to a phenomenal £743.14s for an actress in London. In between, the average budget of £8-£9 a year covered rouge, lipstick and face powder as basics, plus visits to the hairdresser

The road to freedom? This 1920s Ford ad underlines the gendered appeal of new appliances to middle-class women between the wars, giving the illusion of independent initiative away from the home as well as in it.

and beauty salons.

In spite of the size of their circulations, it is important not to magnify the influence of these magazines beyond their scope. Compared to the multi-million pound and multimedia industry that exists today, with its international commercial links, *Ideal Home, Good Housekeeping* and their interwar competitors were small-fry. Just as the daily lives of these women were constantly responding to the pressures of society around them, so the magazines can be seen to have similarly adapted in the messages they sent to their readers. Some of these pressures were touched on in their general features, but on the whole, it comes across that their intentions were to help a woman at home in the way they thought best – a practical way – even to the extent of suggesting she breed rabbits at home to 'grow your own fur coat'!

In the predominantly female and often isolated suburban society that these women inhabited, it is not surprising that they looked towards a magazine as a reliable source of reassurance. The magazines in turn steadfastly maintained their adulation of the 'science' of domesticity in a manner which very conveniently mirrored the general view of the role of women at the time, and gave manufacturers a ready market for their products.

Whilst the editorials tried to convince women it was efficiency of their housework that would bring them happiness, the advertisers tried to convince them that it was the equipment they purchased that would change their lives and enhance their social status. The message was clear. The achievement of a perfect home, a happy husband and a healthy family could all be achieved if the right food, dress, vacuum cleaner or gas fire were bought. *Plus ça change ...*

The opening of the London School of Electrical Domestic Science in Knightsbridge, January 1934. The guest of honour (left) was Lady Moir, President of the 'Electrical Association for Women'.

It is undoubtedly true that for many women between the wars, the lifestyle of the comfortably-off middle-class wife, such as epitomised by Jan Struther's Mrs Miniver, was an idyll they longed to achieve. 'The carpet and the three-piece suite, the Hoover and the new gas-oven' it has been said, were 'icons of hope and dignity as well as of pride and envy'. *Good Housekeeping* stepped in to answer a need at a time when the somewhat Victorian notion of 'respectability' had reached a much more visible zenith and a woman would be judged by her peers as much by the whiteness of her net curtains as by the cut of her clothes.

It is perhaps ironic that while *Good Housekeeping* started out to be 'revolutionary' in its editorial content, it has ended up so much a part of the establishment that its influence can be seen merely as a reflection of the interests of its readers. Post-war social trends with yet more 'back-to-the-kitchen' regression have done little to dent its position as a domestic 'bible' to its readers. As women have increasingly deserted the kitchen for the workplace, however, only by recognising their changing needs has *Good Housekeeping*, along with the other service magazines, managed to retain its readership and its relevance. The links with consumerism, though, are immutable.

Brave new world? This 1935 kitchen – displayed at an exhibition of 'British Art in Industry' – combines the latest clean lines and a muted influence of Art Deco, evoking a shrine to efficient domestic industry.

FOR FURTHER READING:

J. Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain 1880-1980* (Longman, 1994); B. Braithwaite, *Women's Magazines: The First 300 Years* (Peter Own, 1995); C. Davidson, *A Woman's Work is Never Done* (Chatto & Windus, 1982); J. Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain 1900-1950* (MacMillan, 1995); F. Gloversmith (ed.), *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s* (Harvester, 1980); R. Graves and A. Hodge, *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (Abacus, 1995); C. Hardyment, *From Mangle to Microwave* (Polity Press, 1988); C. White, *Women's Magazines 1693-1968* (Michael Joseph, 1970).

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